



Category: 香港藝術中心 Hong Kong Arts Centre
 06 July, 2018
 China Daily (HK Edition), China
 Section: Circulation: 200000 Page: 11
 Printed Size: 700cm² Region: CN ASR: HK\$106787.8
 Item ID: 3118689

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Washing dirty linen with the public

Editor's Note: Highly acclaimed at home and internationally for her site-specific installations, Jaffa Lam has tried melding theater with visual art in a new immersive art project. She shares with China Daily Hong Kong the story behind creating a show that questions assumptions about "purity".

Q: What's the idea behind your new immersive art project, *Piu*? How did you arrive at it?

A: I have collaborated with the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association since 2008. These women come mostly from under-privileged backgrounds. They either do part-time jobs, or stay at home, look after the children, work as domestic helpers or cleaning ladies. I worked with them on a project using recycled clothes for a show on the Chinese mainland in 2016. We used only white clothes. These are the most difficult to sell in a second-hand clothes shop. While people like wearing white clothes as they seem to symbolize cleanliness, purity etc, they tend to discard them sooner than colored clothes and there are no takers for them in the recycled clothes market. Somehow I connect such tendencies to people's social behavior. For instance, everyone says we want to improve our lives. So I am trying to question the very notions of "improvement" and "purity".

Q: Although some of your previous works — *Singing under the Moon for Today and Tomorrow* for instance — conjured up a sense of theater, this is the first time you have actively collaborated with people who work in theater...

A: One of my reasons for saying yes to the project (commissioned by Hong Kong Arts Centre for the Dragonix Multi-Arts Festival) is because I wanted to know more about the form of theater. I spent 2 years studying theater and performance art forms. I wanted to work in theater but then I wanted to create something abstract and improvised rather than follow a script.

In visual arts we usually don't have a well-defined beginning and end. I wondered why we couldn't do the same in theater. I spent days and nights talking about this with the theater people (including director Fong Ki-tuen) I was going to collaborate with.

Q: The title of your show is intriguing. What does *Piu* signify?

A: *Piu* translates as bleach in Cantonese. Then it could also be pronounced in a way to mean suspending, floating, being adrift, and in yet another kind of pronunciation it could suggest pretty. It's a sensory experience for the audience who go through a journey with the artist. Hopefully at the end of it they will feel cleansed and purified of the drudgeries of daily life. In Hong

Kong many of us often feel exhausted or work too hard. I hope the experience can be akin to meditating for those who feel stressed out.

Q: How active do you expect the audiences to get during the show?

A: The venue, Shouson Theatre, will be transformed into something like a giant laundromat for the show. The theater has a capacity of 450, but only 60 people will be admitted to each show. They are welcome to sit anywhere, move around, stand right next to me and my fellow performers. There will be live music, or rather certain sounds will be generated. I'm going to be one among what I'd like to call "workers", rather than actors or performers. I won't speak but use gestures which hopefully will lead the audiences somewhere.



Jaffa Lam
ARTIST



IF YOU GO

Piu: Bleaching Life, Remaking Hong Kong Theater
 Dragonix Multi-Arts Festival
 Concept and artistic director: Jaffa Lam
 Venue: Shouson Theatre, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2 Harbour Road, Wan Chai
 Dates: Friday-July 14
 www.hkac.org.hk

The show doesn't have a definite structure. For example, the audiences won't receive any instructions on where to stand and when to leave, mostly that is. So for each person in the audience the experience could be different. They have to actively participate in order to get the most out of the show.

Q: So at the end of the day what would you expect the audience to take away from the show — art or theater?

A: I would like the audience to experience and enjoy a sense of theater through a visual art experience, feel the tension and energy, that's somewhere in between visual art and theater. This show is the result of a very reciprocal collaboration between visual arts and theater people. In the process we have both tried to gauge where the boundaries between our two fields lie. The way they and I had visualized the show turned out to be very different. I discovered that the theater people had to be more specific and graphic with their imagination than someone like me, who could get away with visualizing the show as a more abstract piece. To try to explain and convince them about my point of view took quite a bit of work. In retrospect, I realize we had those long-drawn conversations because the show's director and light and sound designers were trying to work out a way of expressing my aesthetic through the idiom of theater. It's me they wanted to prevail.

I hope the audiences find something different from my previous work in this show, for in a way it is a retrospective of my work so far.

Q: Do you want the show to have a cathartic effect on the audience — would you expect them to start looking at things differently after they walk out of the show?

A: I would expect *Piu* to challenge previous notions about me as an artist. Visual artists have worked closely with theater people before, but they would usually be invited to design the backdrop. It's very rare to have a visual artist conduct and direct theater. I wanted the show to be somewhere between theater and reality. I have created dream-like experiences for the audience before in my installation works, but this time I am working with sophisticated lighting equipment meant for the stage.

I told my collaborators that this show won't be about acting, rather about movement. I told the musicians I didn't want beautiful sounds, I wanted to create a mood, and a thought and have the sounds emerge as a response to the performance.

Interviewed by Chitralakha Basu.